Achieving Equitable Improvement in Outcomes:
The role of decentralized school support

Joseph DeStefano, RTI International

▶▶▶ There is growing attention to the importance of the "middle tier" of education systems in supporting improvements in teaching and learning. The middle tier varies by education system but most often refers to the decentralized administrative offices at the district or subdistrict levels. Education system staff at those levels interact directly with teachers and school leaders. These may include education administrators, school or subject area inspection officers, teacher coaches or mentors, or teacher trainers.

The significance of the role of the middle tier is self-evident. To improve teaching and learning at scale, education systems need to support schools and communities, and the level of the system that interacts directly with schools (the middle tier) plays a critical role in doing this. Why bother to have an education system if it cannot touch and support schools?

However, do the middle tiers of education systems interact with schools in ways that reinforce existing patterns of inequity? Writing for the United Nations' *UN Chronicle*, Sylvia Schmelkes (2020), provost of the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico, states, "When left to inertial decision-making, education systems seem to be doomed to reproduce social and economic inequity. The commitment of both governments and societies to equity in education is both necessary and possible." What would such a commitment look like? And, more relevant to our purpose, in what ways would such a commitment change the ways the middle tier of an education system would need to interact with schools?

The Learning at Scale study was designed to provide evidence on the successful approaches used to improve learning outcomes in effective large-scale education programs in LMICs (learningatscale.net). This brief is the second in a three part series, drawing on the expertise of thought leaders to highlight broader policy implications stemming from this research.

This brief explores the extent to which improvements at scale are being achieved equitably and posits ways the middle tier can more purposefully promote equity.

Are improved outcomes being achieved equitably?

For the Learning at Scale study, we identified eight programs that had achieved significant improvements in average levels of reading performance at an appreciable scale. Whether those gains in performance were achieved equitably was left uninvestigated. However, taking one example from the programs studied—the Tusome program in Kenya—we see that gains in average performance were driven primarily by a minority of schools. Figure 1 illustrates this.

Figure 1. Gains at the school level in Kenya in oral reading fluency from baseline to midline

Additional correct words per minute (cwpm)

Schools with gains of 12 or more cwpm
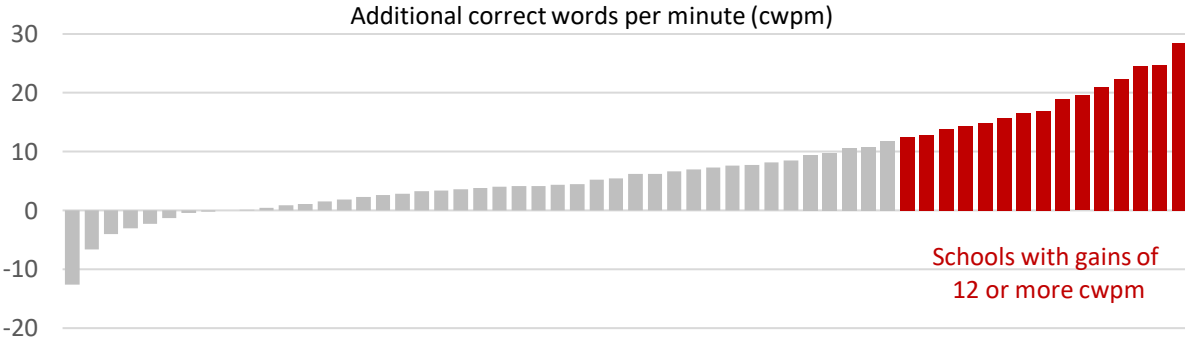
Tusome saw average English oral reading fluency scores in grade 2 increase by 12 correct words per minute between baseline and midline (an effect size of roughly 0.75). Only around a quarter of the schools had gains that were greater than the average gain. The limited size of the sample data on which the above analysis was performed restricts how much we can compare the high-performing and lower-performing schools during the time when reading fluency on average was improving in Kenya. However, other data show that there are consistent and persistent gaps in performance in educational outcomes across low- and middle-income countries.

For example, a 2020 article in *Nature* showed large gender disparities in educational attainment across many regions of the world, with men averaging higher average educational attainment across South Asia and central and western sub-Saharan Africa (Local Burden of Disease Educational Attainment Collaborators, 2020). The *Nature* article also pointed out extreme variations in some instances between the highest- and lowest-performing areas within countries. In addition, data from UNESCO's (n.d.) World Inequality Database on Education illustrate gaps in primary completion rates

between rural and urban locations and between the lowest and highest income categories in selected low- and middle-income countries, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Inequity in primary completion rates between urban and rural and highest and lowest income segments of populations in selected low- and middle-income countries
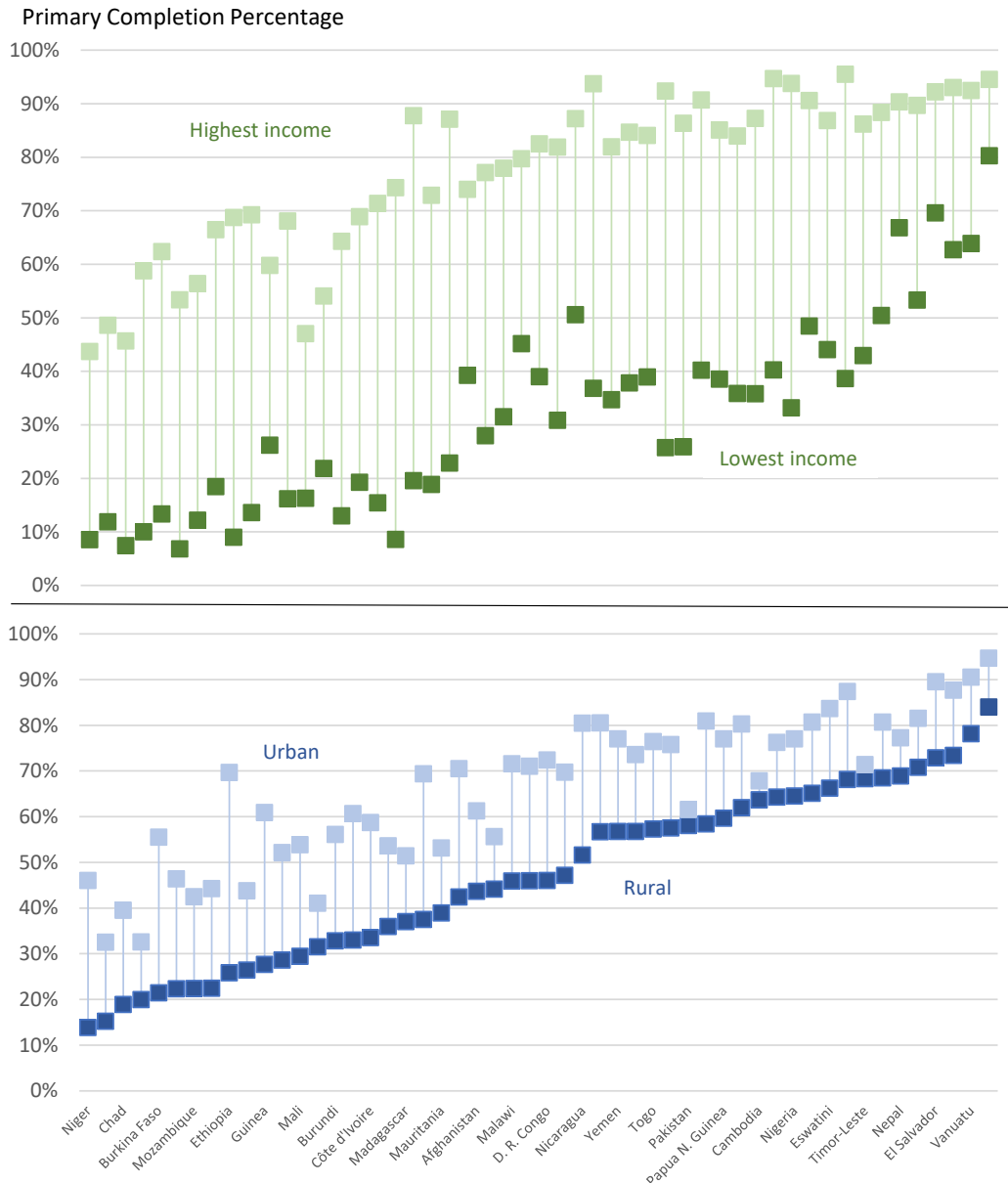
These data show significant gaps in many countries and reveal that even in countries with high levels of primary completion, students from the lowest income group or from rural areas are sometimes completing primary school at lower rates than their peers. Of course, these factors also have compounded effects: children who are poor, live in a rural area, and who are female are often the most disadvantaged.

Can the middle tier help improve learning?

One of the Learning at Scale research questions asked, "What system supports are required to drive effective training and support to teachers and to promote effective classroom practices?" The underlying assumption was that to achieve success at scale, it is necessary to strengthen the education system in ways that support the instructional improvements and teacher development interventions being introduced at the school level. The cross-country study found that the decentralized levels of countries' education systems do play key roles in communicating and reinforcing program expectations for schools. Regular monitoring was also found to be critical to maintaining a programmatic focus on improved instruction and learning.

A recent brief for [Learning at Scale by Minahil Asim (2023)](#) asks whether the "middle tier" can drive foundational learning at scale and concludes that decentralized education offices, most likely at the district or subdistrict level, can contribute to improving learning at scale in three ways:

- by providing instructional leadership,
- by strengthening the capacity of middle-tier actors to drive instruction and learning, and
- by building a trusting relationship with teachers.

What is not clear from the evidence analyzed by Asim is whether there is adequate provision of the contributions listed above to enable sufficient support to be targeted to the communities, schools, and students who need it the most.

Programs researched for Learning at Scale showed that district- or subdistrict-level staff can learn the basics of the pedagogical approach being introduced through a program. In fact, equipping staff at these middle-tier levels with the tools needed to visit schools and reinforce the basics of a structured pedagogy approach was one thing that contributed to those programs' ability to achieve impact at scale. These middle-tier actors learned to reinforce the basics such as reminding teachers to use the teacher's guide and work their way through the sequence of lessons.

In 2019, UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), in collaboration with the Education Development Trust (EDT), launched an effort to explore the role of middle-tier instructional leaders. The IIEP postulates that "introducing or strengthening instructional leader roles at the middle tier of education systems may be part of the solution" (International Institute for Educational

Planning, n.d.). And emerging evidence from the case studies conducted by IIEP and EDT (Tournier et al., 2023) in Delhi, Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai, and Wales shows that middle-tier actors serving as instructional leaders can also facilitate and support active learning communities among teachers (e.g., at the cluster level).

What is not addressed in the research by IIEP and EDT or in Asim's paper is whether the effects that are being seen through the increased capacity of the middle tier are reducing inequities in learning outcomes. Given the additional challenges that we know exist for some students, teachers, schools, and communities, it is reasonable to hypothesize that unless those challenges are addressed directly, the prevailing pattern of disadvantage will continue. To explore how the middle tier can best contribute to redressing inequities, we must reflect on the aspects of system capacity that are needed to overcome persistent inequities in education.

What is needed for the middle tier to improve outcomes while reducing inequity?

Below are four ways that the middle tier of countries' education systems can take a more deliberate approach to improving equity.

1. **Prioritize school support, not just administrative oversight.** Education districts and subdistricts in most low- and middle-income countries lack discretionary resources that they can manage and direct. Often, the main resource they have is staff, and even that is limited, with each school support staff member responsible for ten or more schools in many cases. The most critical resource decision made at these middle-tier levels is therefore usually focused on where staff will direct their attention.

   For example, the Learning at Scale study found that in successful programs, shifting from an inspection approach to a coaching approach when interacting with schools was a contributing factor to improvement at scale. This is confirmed by some of the findings from the IIEP and EDT research as well (when acting as coaches or instructional leaders, middle-tier staff can build trust and support reflective practice among the groups of teachers for which they are responsible). Successful programs in Learning at Scale allocated attention to supporting and

encouraging teachers rather than inspecting and evaluating them based on administrative requirements.

But two things are of concern. One is the actual job description of many middle-tier staff, which often emphasizes administration and supervision (or inspection) as opposed to school support. Therefore, those job descriptions may likely need to change, along with the institutional culture within which middle-tier staff come to understand their roles. A second concern relates to who actually fills those roles in the middle tier. In some education systems, these individuals are "inspectors" trained in subject-matter areas (and who likely were secondary school teachers before rising in rank to inspector). Therefore, in addition to recasting the job as one of school support, there also needs to be a degree of retraining for— if not enculturation into—this role.

While the shift from inspection to support is a positive and important step forward, if each school is still being allocated equal attention from the middle tier, those schools that need more support are still left behind, meaning that inequities in the system are not being directly confronted.

2. **Embrace a deliberately "disproportionate" allocation of attention.** A shift from a doctrine of fair or equal distribution of resources to one of promoting equity is needed in order to support the teachers and schools that struggle the most to improve instruction and learning outcomes.

   Reflecting on the experience of the Tusome program in Kenya, Piper et al. (2018) note that the frequency of school visits by subcounty-level curriculum support officers was what mattered most—more so than any particular guidance that those officers provided to teachers. Tusome helped rewrite the job descriptions for these middle-tier staff and introduced a system to monitor their visits to the schools. Payment of the travel allowance associated with those visits was contingent on the officer visiting all of their assigned schools, creating an incentive to get to the hardest-to-reach locations. These institutional shifts contributed to most schools receiving the desired number of support visits. However, the adjustments did not account for the fact that some schools and communities (those

disadvantaged for all the usual reasons) needed *extra* help. Promoting more equitable outcomes would have required unequal amounts of support based on an identification of which schools, teachers, and students were struggling.

Just as remediation programs target and identify students who are struggling, so too should the middle tier identify and target additional attention to schools and communities that are struggling because of their position of disadvantage (e.g., being remote, being poorer, serving language or ethnic minorities, or being impacted by environmental or social disruptions). Emerging evidence from the second phase of the Learning at Scale study indicates that dashboards used to monitor progress revealed which schools and students needed additional support. What is not clear is whether middle-tier staff provided that extra support, even when information indicated that it was needed.

3. **Monitor school outcomes.** To direct the above kinds of interventions to where they are needed, the middle tier in the education system needs monitoring systems that indicate which schools and communities are struggling. Assessment is one dimension of any such monitoring system, and it indicates which schools are failing to achieve improved outcomes. However, other leading indicators or early signs that a school may be struggling need to be monitored as well so that attention and interventions can be deployed early enough to help get things back on track. Student attendance, teacher attendance, and evidence of progress in implementing desired instructional practices should also be monitored. Low-cost, easy-to-implement data systems that allow such information to be gathered at the school level and monitored at the middle tier are needed (as opposed to data systems that focus on centralizing and aggregating data at the national level). Examples of "early warning systems" from the United States and increasingly in low- and middle-income countries show that tracking student attendance and frequency of behavioral issues can identify students at risk of dropping out. A World Bank blog (Alegría et al., 2023) drawing on experiences in Latin America regarding such systems recommends that early warning systems be easy to understand and use, and it warns against a focus only on data collection and not on the interventions needed to respond to students' early signs of trouble.

Within schools, successful remedial programs not only introduce the means to assess students and identify those who are falling behind but also have ready the package of instructional interventions and supplemental learning opportunities that children who are falling behind need to catch up. The same approach is needed at the middle tier.

4. **Have responses ready.** Knowing that inequities among schools and communities will inevitably exist in most, if not all, education districts, the middle tier needs to prepare the packet of interventions that will be offered to those locations that are struggling to improve teaching and learning. The nature of the packet being offered should be based on best practices and aligned with the issues that a school or community may be confronting. For example, it is important to differentiate between disadvantages that stem from school- or instruction-related constraints and those that are community or family related.

In the former case, interventions can be as simple as a schedule of more frequent visits from middle-tier support personnel to those schools where teachers need extra support in learning and applying improved instructional methods. A more comprehensive approach would be to provide struggling teachers with a more structured pedagogical approach (i.e., more explicitly directive or scripted lessons). Support could also include additional instructional resources, such as a well-defined remedial program, along with training and support to school and community members on how to organize and implement it.

In cases where poverty or environmental, social, or other conditions are impacting families and children (such as by leading to high rates of absenteeism or other disruptions to learning opportunities), interventions aimed solely at improving instruction will not address the underlying problems. What should middle-tier personnel do in those instances? Unless education systems can design and have middle-tier managers carry out explicit processes for helping certain communities overcome the contextual factors that cause them and their children to be disadvantaged, inequities in outcomes will persist. A review of promising practices for promoting equity in US schools (America's Promise Alliance et al., 2018) points to the need to prioritize attention toward the needs of students growing up in poverty or who are disproportionately exposed to trauma and adverse childhood experiences. The report cites an example from the state of Connecticut, where the state education authority provides

districts with guidance on best practices for addressing chronic absenteeism. In Oklahoma, the state government works with districts to monitor the implementation of feeding programs in schools and communities where children are most in need of nutritional support.

Conclusion

A recent RISE report (Crouch, 2020) analyzing improved learning outcomes in Brazil, Mexico, and Kenya raises the importance of "tight management" down the education system. The Learning at Scale study (Stern et al, 2023), as well as research by Asim (2023) and IIEP and EDT (Tournier et al., 2023) all marshal evidence indicating that improving instruction and learning relies on the ability of the middle tier to support the uptake of improved instructional practices.

Beyond reinforcing the middle tier's capacity to support rather than just administratively supervise schools, additional effort is needed to ensure that the middle tier can promote equity. In this regard, the provision of support needs to do the following:

- at a minimum, direct the effort of middle-tier actors to providing more visits and greater support to disadvantaged or struggling schools;

- rely on low-cost, easy-to-implement data systems that feed information on school progress to the middle tier, enabling it to identify those schools that are falling behind;

- differentiate between disadvantages that stem from school management or instructional limitations and those that arise due to community or family constraints; and

- have packaged interventions ready to deploy when monitoring systems reveal struggling schools, teaches, students, or communities.

Future efforts can build on the work already being done to define the ways in which strategies such as those listed here can be used by the middle tier to more equitably improve learning outcomes.

Joseph DeStefano has 30 years of experience with a full range of K-12 education issues, including teacher policy, teacher professional development, early grade reading assessment, school-community relations, education system finance, EMIS, and policy and institutional reform. He has provided policy analysis and data support to several urban school districts in the U.S. and to numerous ministries of education throughout the developing world.

In his current role, Mr. DeStefano is leading RTI's work on supporting education system reforms related to the policies, strategies, and management capacities necessary to improve learning outcomes on a large scale. He provides technical assistance and policy support to programs throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and contributes to building countries' capacity to improve education and governance.

He has researched a variety of topics, including the political economy of education reform, the effectiveness and efficiency of community-based schooling, education system contributions to meeting workforce demand, and teacher deployment. Most recently, he has authored numerous analytical reports, facilitated high-level dialogue, and supported policy decision-making related to improving the teaching and learning or reading in the early grades of primary school.

Joe holds a BS in Education from Adelphia University, and an MEd from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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